



Unaccompanied Children: Risks and violence along the migration route through Mexico

Executive Summary



Until we are all equal



Save the Children



Funded by
the European Union

Research conducted by Plan International and Save the Children in Mexico, based on the technical document developed by the Human Rights Program at Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City.

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With the participation of:
Plan International Mexico, the Regional Office for the Americas (ROAH), and Save the Children in Mexico.

This publication was made possible thanks to funding from the European Union within the framework of the project Multisectoral Humanitarian Response for Vulnerable Populations Forcibly Displaced in Mexico. The content of this publication is the sole responsibility of Plan International Mexico and Save the Children in Mexico and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.

This research is primarily based on third-party opinions, obtained with consent through surveys, interviews, and focus groups.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:
We sincerely thank all the adolescents, families, and key stakeholders who generously shared their valuable testimonies. We extend our deepest gratitude to them for their trust and willingness to contribute to this research, which aims to amplify their voices and support their comprehensive protection.

We also want to thank Save the Children in Mexico for their valuable collaboration and commitment to this joint effort, as well as Plan International Switzerland and Plan International Spain for their dedication, effort, and work across all offices involved in the realization of this research, including their local partners and the Regional Office for the Americas (ROAH).

We are equally grateful to our colleagues at the Human Rights Program of Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City (CDMX), and to all their research partners, for their professionalism and rigorous work throughout the various phases of this research.

Special thanks to the research team: Nasly Castillo Arteaga, Eugenia Morales Viana, Emilio López Reyes, Emilia Licón Morales, Fernanda Lobo Díaz, Janette Carrillo Díaz, and Antonio Trejo Sánchez, for their valuable contribution and commitment throughout this process.

We would also like to thank all the organizations and key stakeholders in the cities of Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, and Reynosa who work every day to improve the conditions for children and adolescents in transit and who welcomed us and made this research possible.

The coordination of the research was led by Andrea Horcasitas Martínez, to whom we extend special recognition.

This entire team has been essential to the completion of this research.

May 2025

About Save the Children in Mexico

Save the Children is the leading independent organization promoting and defending the rights of children and adolescents. It operates in more than 120 countries, responding to emergencies and implementing development programs. It supports children to enjoy a healthy and safe childhood. In Mexico, Save the Children has been working since 1973 with programs focused on health and nutrition, education, protection, and the defense of children’s and adolescents’ rights, within the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

About Plan International

Plan International is an independent organization founded in Spain in 1937, committed to children's rights and girls' equality. It works for a more just world where girls can learn, lead, decide, and thrive. Throughout its 85-year history, it has built strong partnerships to support the rights of children from birth to adulthood. Today, Plan International operates in more than 80 countries and implements programs in over 50 countries across Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

We won't stop until we are all equal!

Multisector Humanitarian Response to Vulnerable Forcibly Displaced people in Mexico Project

The Multisector Humanitarian Response to Vulnerable Forcibly Displaced people in Mexico project, funded by the European Union, addresses the humanitarian and migration crisis along Mexico's southern and northern borders. It seeks to meet the critical needs of migrant populations, with a special focus on girls, adolescent girls, and women survivors of gender-based violence (GBV).

This intervention is implemented through a consortium led by Save the Children, in partnership with Plan International, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), Médecins du Monde – France, Alternativas Pacíficas, Casa Frida, and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

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Plan International team at the northern border of Mexico
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1. Introduction

The northern border of Mexico is marked by a particularly intricate migration dynamic, characterised by two interconnected phenomena: forced internal displacement due to violence and the transit of foreign populations, originating in contexts of insecurity and unmet opportunities. Such movements impact women, children and youth (CAY) in diverse ways, as well as Indigenous communities, who encounter both criminal risks – including territorial control by armed groups, community conflicts, and gender-based violence – and structural risks derived from restrictive migration policies at both national and international levels.

In this context, thousands of children and youth embark on a journey through Mexico each year, either alone or accompanied, in pursuit of protection, family reunification or improved living conditions. The executive summary presents the key findings of research conducted by Plan International Mexico and Save the Children Mexico in collaboration with the Human Rights Program of the Universidad Iberoamericana CDMX .

The research constitutes a core component of the global mission of **Save the Children**, a prominent autonomous organization dedicated to promoting and protecting the rights of children and youth. Operating in over 120 countries, the organization responds to emergencies and implements development programmes to ensure children enjoy a healthy and secure childhood. Since 1973, the organization has operated within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child framework in Mexico. The programmes it oversees encompass health and nutrition, education, protection and the defence of the rights of children and youth. **Plan International**, an independent humanitarian and development organization that promotes children's rights and equality for girls, also operates in this context. For more than 85 years, the organization has convened individuals of a resolute and optimistic disposition to effect a positive transformation in the lives of children in more than 80 countries. Since 2020, Plan International has been operating in Mexico, responding to the humanitarian and mobility crisis and supporting children, youth and their families within displacement contexts.

This research is based on a comprehensive analysis of interviews and focus groups with children accompanied and unaccompanied in the children and youth of Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, and Reynosa. The study also draws on insights from personnel from key organizations and services. The research explores the causes that motivate the migration of CAY, the risks experienced during the journey, the structural and institutional violence they face, and the emotional, physical, and social consequences of their mobility contexts.

The executive summary comprises a synthesis of the research methodology and the demographic profile of the study participants, in addition to the study's primary findings. Subsequent recommendations are then proposed to enhance institutional and community responses to the urgent requirements of this population. The comprehensive document which you can find on our website (plan-international.org/mexico) includes quantitative and qualitative data, and a compendium of goods implemented in the territory to facilitate a greater understanding.

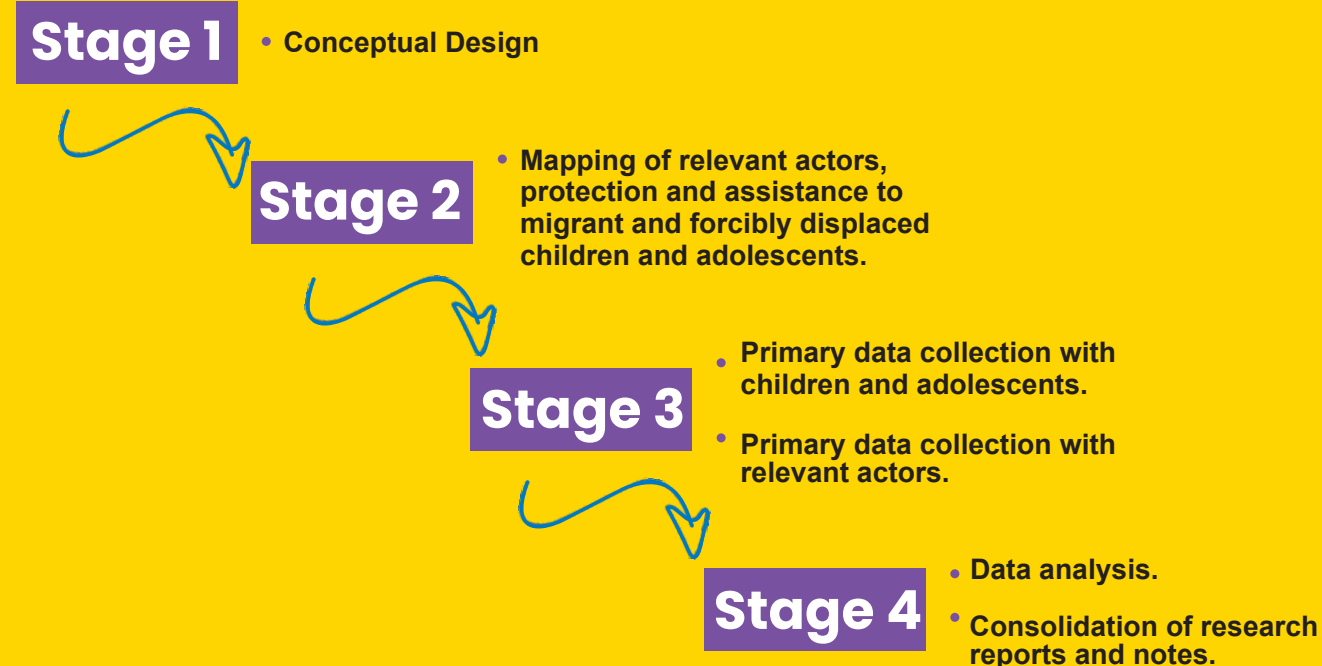
It is relevant to mention that the research collects testimonies of the experiences of CAY and reflections of people who accompany this population daily. To all of them, we express our profound gratitude for their generosity and for trusting in this research that seeks to amplify their voices and contribute to their integral protection. We are also particularly grateful for the financial support of the European Union, Plan International Switzerland, without whose support this research would not have been possible.

2. Methodology

For this research, a mixed methodology was developed in four phases between November 2024 and February 2025. Data was collected in three border cities: Reynosa, Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez. **The selection of these locations allowed us to capture the diversity of migration experiences and patterns of forced internal displacement, with special attention to the intersections between gender, age and nationality.**

The research collects information on two key groups: 1) unaccompanied migrant or internally displaced CAY and 2) actors linked to their protection (officials, civil society organizations, humanitarian and social workers). Figure 1 provides a visual overview of the research phases.

Diagram 1.
Phases of the investigation.



Visual based on field surveys.

Phase 1

Phase 1 consisted of the creation of instruments and methodological design. Rigorous ethical protocols endorsed by the Universidad Iberoamericana, Plan International, and Save the Children were incorporated, guaranteeing informed consent, use of pseudonyms and adaptations for the target population.

Phase 2

Phase 2 mapped key actors and spaces of opportunity in the three cities. Built from identifying actors with legal or regulatory responsibility and organizations that provide direct care and protection to the population on the move. Enabling the establishment of priorities, alliances, and a collaborative strategy to access key information and ensure the participation of institutions and organizations.

Phase 3

Phase 3 focused on primary data collection. The qualitative approach included 39 semi-structured interviews and 8 focus groups that applied the biographical method, privileging the narratives of CAY as experts of their own experiences. In addition, 155 surveys were used with standardized questionnaires of 73 questions organised into 8 thematic modules, ranging from their demographic profile to their experiences of violence.

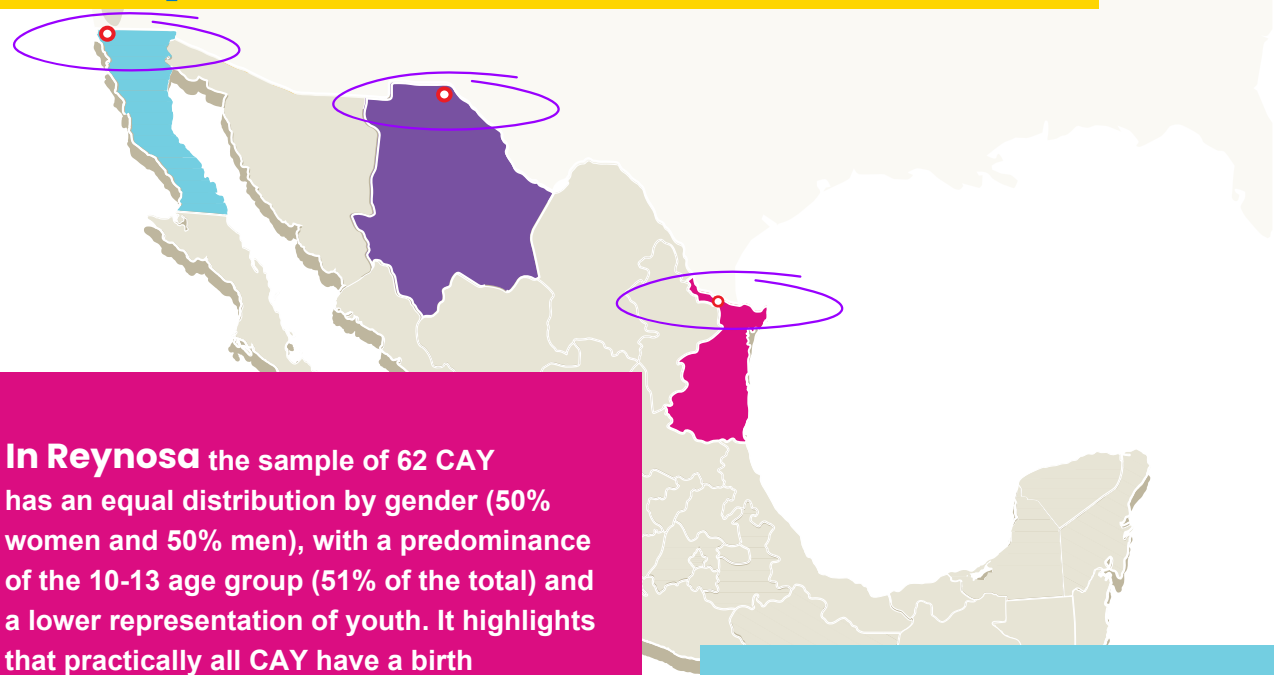
The fieldwork faced significant challenges: restricted access for CAY outside civil society shelters or reception spaces due to insecurity, initial mistrust of the participants, and bureaucratic barriers in institutional shelters. Despite these limitations, it was possible to document significant experiences and distinctions from each context and city.

Phase 4

Phase 4 involved analysing and systematising data with an intersectional approach, prioritising children's and youth's voices. The analysis implemented systematisation with specialised software (atlas.ti and Excel), organising the findings into five central categories with their respective subthemes: mobility situation (motivations and risks), family environment (socioeconomic challenges and intra-family violence), institutional environment (coordination and programmatic continuity), care priorities (mental health and education) and violence (organised, institutional and gender crime). The structure enabled capturing the migration phenomenon's structural dimensions and subjective experiences.

As a main limitation, the research recognises that the sample prioritised CAY in institutional contexts, leaving out the experiences of those who travel through informal routes or unregulated spaces. However, the results provide evidence of the violation of rights faced by children on the move and some of the obstacles that prevent adequate care, highlighting the need to strengthen protection mechanisms that consider the particularities of gender, age, and nationality.

3. Population characteristics



In Reynosa the sample of 62 CAY has an equal distribution by gender (50% women and 50% men), with a predominance of the 10-13 age group (51% of the total) and a lower representation of youth. It highlights that practically all CAY have a birth certificate, but only 42% of women and 39% of men have educational credentials, evidencing possible barriers to their school integration. 6% speak indigenous languages, and it is recorded that 6% of the participating women had a disability (no cases of disability are identified in the male participants), factors that increase their vulnerability. The diversity of origin is remarkable: 37.1% from Honduras and another 37.1% from Mexico (mainly from Michoacán, Chiapas and Guerrero), followed by Venezuela (11.3%), El Salvador (5%), Ecuador and Guatemala (3%) and Colombia and the United States (2%).

In Tijuana, the sample of 19 CAY shows a slight female predominance (56.5%) with a higher concentration in the 7-9 age group (46% women and 30% men). None of the CAY surveyed reported having educational credentials, and 80% had a birth certificate. The population is predominantly Mexican (89.5%), mainly from Guerrero (29.4%) and Michoacán (23.5%), with a minority presence of Honduran CAY and one case of a girl of Mexican parents born in the United States.

Ciudad Juárez presents the most differentiated scenario: of 74 CAY surveyed, 64% are men, and 35% are women (plus one non-binary person). Youth groups stood out the most (76%). All CAYs have birth certificates but lack educational credentials. 81% are Mexican, mainly from Michoacán (21.7%), Chihuahua (18.3%) and Chiapas (16.7%), followed by CAY from Guatemala (8.1%), Venezuela and Honduras (5.4%). A lower percentage is found in Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua (4.2%), and the Dominican Republic (1.4%).

4. Findings and results of the information collection

The research reveals a complex picture of the characteristics of CAY on the move, both international migrants and internally displaced persons, in the three Mexican border cities. In general, and as can be seen in Figure 1, the results reveal that the causes for CAY to move are mainly due to family reunification (34.8%), fleeing criminal violence (21.3%) or fleeing direct threats or community conflicts (11.6%). Notably, in Mexican CAY, the pattern of internal displacement reflects flight from states with high violence and poverty to the Northern Border.

Next, the mobility situation of CAY, their accompaniment during the journey, the family situation of origin, the institutional environment they face on their journey, and the priorities of care and violence expressed by the CAY and service providers are highlighted.



Unaccompanied children on the move at a shelter in Mexico © Plan International

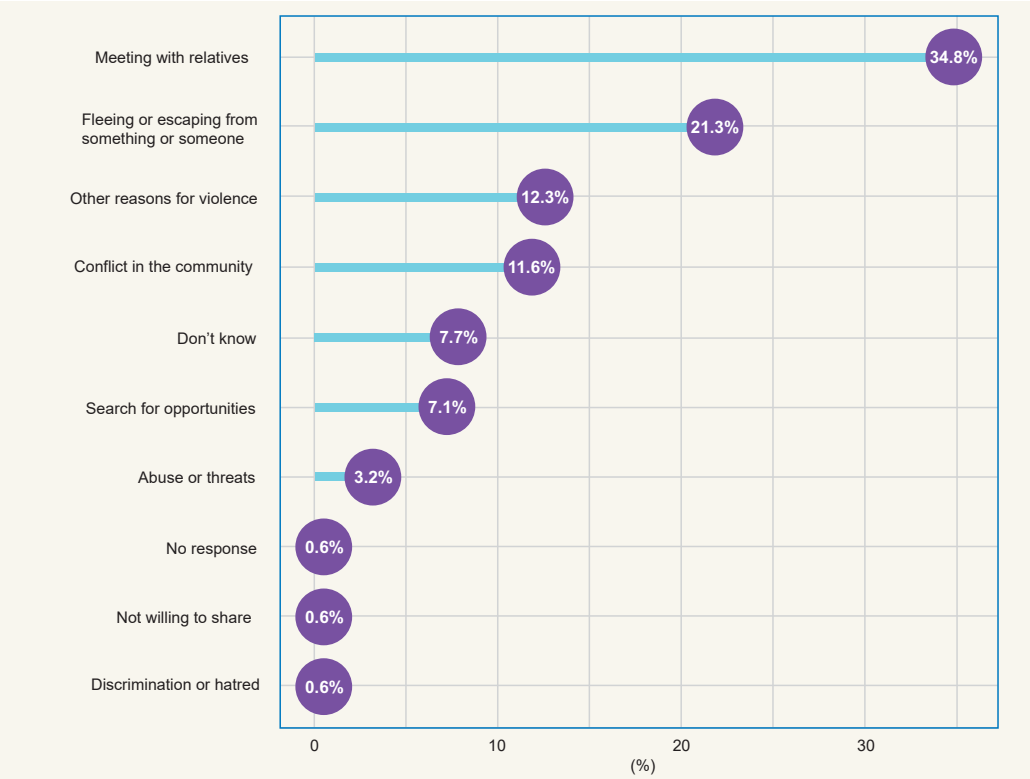
4.1 Mobility crisis of children and youth

Structural conditions of poverty, inequality and violence mark the mobility contexts of CAY. Both unaccompanied and accompanied CAY flee contexts where family violence, gender-based violence, organised crime and community conflicts predominate.

Girls and adolescent girls tend to mention more frequently the desire to flee dangerous environments or reunite with loved ones, while children and youth also highlight economic motivations. Two girls with whom contact was made at a shelter in Tijuana reported that they left their place of origin due to the violence exercised by their parents.

About 7.7% of CAYs do not know the reasons for their displacement, which reflects the lack of communication by responsible adults. On this, a participant in a focus group in Reynosa expressed that the lack of information may be due to parents not communicating with their children about the reasons for their departure. *"Adults made that decision, only what they say"* (Humanitarian worker, during a focus group participation). In general, it is observed that family networks play a central role in CAY on the move, whether they seek to reunite with close relatives (fathers, mothers, caregivers or siblings) or distant relatives (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins) in other countries.

Figure 1. Reasons for leaving among CAY on the move surveyed in Ciudad Juárez, Reynosa and Tijuana



Visual based on field surveys.

Concerning the destination of CAY in Reynosa, 80% of girls and adolescent girls and 70% of children and youth had a defined destination of arrival in the United States. 74% had acquaintances in that place who served as sponsors, a requirement to apply for asylum in the United States. In Tijuana, only 31.6% of CAY reported having a specific place to arrive in the United States; also, 47% indicated they knew someone at the destination. In Ciudad Juárez, 90% of CAY showed that they had a specific destination in the United States, and 96% said that they have a family member or acquaintance in the place of destination.

In some cases, reunification occurs with extended family members to avoid separation along the way or notarial custody procedures. Thus, four CAYs were identified as travelling with their uncles and aunts to reunite their families with their parents (siblings of the companions). In an apparent effort to stay together, this family decided to hide their extended family relationship, highlighting how current policies and procedures force migrant or displaced families to resort to concealment strategies to avoid separation.



4.2 Accompaniment of children and youth during the journey.

In the three cities analysed, most CAYs reported having started their migration journey accompanied; however, the type of accompaniment and its duration vary significantly.

In Reynosa, 88.7% were still accompanied at the time of the research, with a high presence of mothers (83.9%) and siblings (62.9%). Only 20% travelled with unspecified people, such as neighbours or other migrants. In Reynosa, greater stability was observed in the accompaniment during children and youth's journey to Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez.



Unaccompanied girl on the move at a shelter in Mexico © Plan International

In Tijuana, 89.5% of CAY reported travelling accompanied by mothers (73.7%) and siblings (84.2%). However, only 52.6% were still accompanied during the research. The remaining percentage (57.4%) experienced conflicts or situations of family reconfiguration that affected accompaniment in the rest of the journey.

In Ciudad Juárez, although 63.5% of the CAY indicated that they had started the trip with the company, only 32.4% were still accompanied at the time of the research. In addition, a considerable proportion travelled with people without a guardianship bond, such as *"el pollero"* or acquaintances from the journey. The most common causes of separation included deportations, loss of contact, or family decisions.

These findings show that, although accompaniment is frequent, at least 57% of CAY in the three cities report that they travel with siblings or extended relatives and that the continuity of accompaniment has not always been guaranteed, which implies that absolute protection is not maintained throughout the journey. Therefore, protection systems must assess the presence, legitimacy, and continuity of companionship and the accompaniment's quality, legitimacy and duration to guarantee effective responses for CAY on the move.

4.3 Family situation of origin

The family situation of CAY is marked by economic precariousness, unstable family structures and family fragmentation, factors that have influenced their displacement. In Reynosa, for example, 92% lived with at least one of their parents, but 66% lived only with their mother, evidencing the absence of their father. Similar dynamics are observed in Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez, with households ranging from small family nuclei to extended structures.

Their parents' limited economic opportunities force many CAYs to work from an early age in informal activities such as agriculture or street trading. For example, before migrating or moving, 27% of CAY in Reynosa worked in the fields or street vending in their cities of origin.

In Tijuana, 47% of CAY worked in businesses or family activities; in Ciudad Juárez, 55% worked in street vending. According to a 16-year-old Guatemalan teenager interviewed in Reynosa: *"I worked and studied simultaneously. On a typical day, I would get up, go to work, and study on the weekends."* (Esmeralda, 16 years old, Guatemala, in a personal interview).

After they moved, the CAY's work activities drastically stopped. Legal restrictions and insecurity in destination cities often explain this decrease in child labour. In Tijuana, a woman from Guerrero said that violence is still latent and that crime groups *"have people everywhere."*

4.4 Institutional environment: challenges in actions to protect CAY on the move

The approach to protecting CAY on the move presents significant challenges in the institutional sphere of Mexico, especially in the border cities assessed. The research did not focus on public policy analysis; however, conversations held with key actors on the ground made it possible to identify crucial obstacles in the care of this population. The mention of instances and actions conducted in each city was based on what the participants in interviews and focus groups mentioned and pointed out as the most relevant or problematic in their particular contexts.

In Reynosa, the need for more excellent institutional coverage emerged as a central point. As one aid worker put it in a focus group: *"It is important to keep working directly with the population and not just with those in the shelters."*

Underscoring the importance of extending protection efforts beyond formal reception spaces to reach more CAY in transit. Another significant challenge identified was the high turnover of personnel in public institutions, a problem that, according to one official, hinders the effective monitoring of inter-institutional agreements: *"We, as a government institution, also have many problems in that regard. We meet to address a topic, and they send us a person. We follow up a month or two later, and they send us to another who does not know anything."* Job instability undermines the continuity and effectiveness of the inter-institutional coordination necessary for comprehensive protection.

In addition, in Reynosa, a deficiency in the National Institute of Migration (INM) was pointed out: the lack of a consolidated system to track the migration flows of CAY in a continuous and coordinated manner. A pedagogue from the Centre for Attention to Border Minors (CAMEF) illustrated this problem by pointing out that:

"One of the main problems is that the migration system, the INM, does not have consolidated information on what happens in one place and what happens in another. For example, many people arrive through the southern border and hardly advance beyond the centre of the country."

The fragmentation of information prevents a comprehensive view of the migration trajectories of CAY, hindering the detection of risks and the implementation of coherent and effective protection routes. The direct consequence is fragmented and, at times, revictimizing care for this population.

In Tijuana, a particular challenge highlighted was the centralisation of attention in the Attorney General's Office, which has limited the participation of civil society organizations. A social worker in the city expressed during a focus group:

"Before we received repatriated youth groups, provided them with care, managed family reunification and detected cases of international protection... however, in the last three years, responsibilities have been transferred to the Attorney General's Office, and although this should be an advance in the law's implementation, but in reality, it has generated a bureaucratic and opaque structure, where there is no observation or external intervention."

The concentration raises concerns about the lack of oversight and possible opacity in protection processes.

Another critical issue in Tijuana was the denunciation of unwanted family reunifications, mainly of Mexican CAY returning to violent environments. A social worker emphasised in a personal interview:

"Mexican children are completely unprotected in terms of the right to ask for international protection. If you are Mexican, you cannot access it. You are automatically reunited with your family in Mexico, regardless of the conditions of violence or risk. They leave them no choice but to try to cross irregularly into the United States."

The practice contravenes the child's best interest principle and exposes CAY to serious risks.

In Ciudad Juárez, the main difficulty identified was the weak coordination between the various bodies involved in the protection of CAY on the move, including the Municipal National System for the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Youth (SIPINNA), the National System for the Integral Development of the Family known as (DIF), the migration authorities and international organizations. The absence of a standard computer system and the frequent presence of personnel without decision-making capacity in the coordination tables were pointed out as obstacles to the effective implementation of agreements. Added to this was the recent withdrawal of organizations that provided crucial support, as recounted by one shelter coordinator in a personal interview:

"He withdrew the support that he had us here as psychologists and abruptly withdrew us this week, on Monday... Social work, psychologists that we had here permanently who helped us in the relocation, four people left on Monday, they withdrew them, they called them to leave."



Unaccompanied adolescent on the move at a shelter in Mexico © Plan International

The loss of this psycho-emotional support and assistance in relocation significantly weakens the ability to respond to the needs of CAY.

Despite the particularities of each border context, significant similarities emerge in the institutional challenges for protecting CAY on the move. The fragmentation of care, the lack of fluid inter-institutional coordination, and systemic obstacles within the migration bodies are recurrent problems in the three cities. High staff turnover and insufficient resourcing also hinder the continuity and quality of protection services.

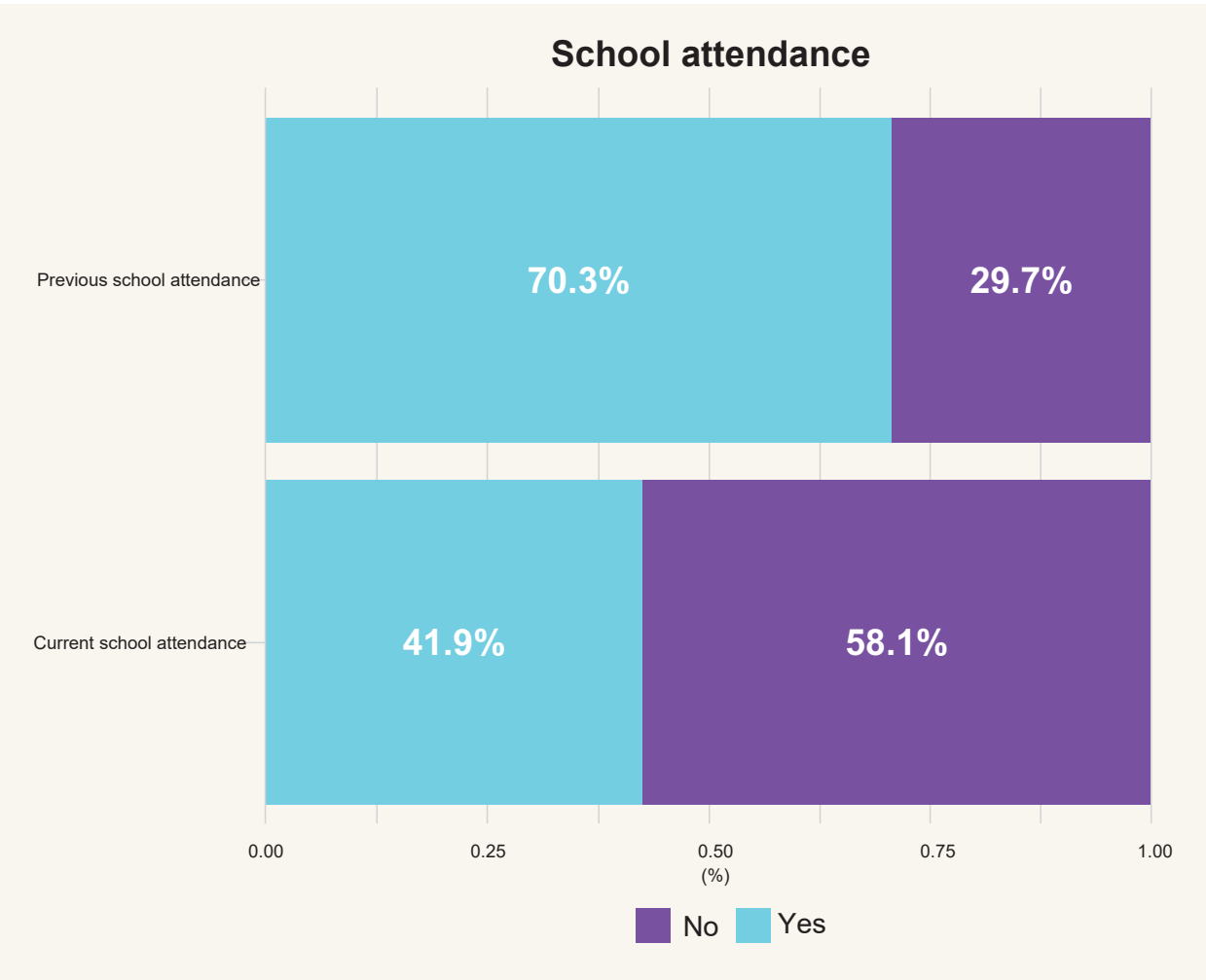
4.5 Priorities in the care of children and youth

Based on the questionnaires and interviews conducted with CAY on the move in the three cities, the primary needs and priorities in care were identified, making their experiences visible in the recent migration context. The results show the importance of access to and protection of their rights in key areas such as education, comprehensive health, care and security.

4.5.1 Access to Education

Figure 2 shows an alarming school dropout rate in the three cities analysed after migration or displacement, with 58.1% of CAY not attending school. In particular, the research reveals that access to education for CAY on the move faces structural barriers that perpetuate their exclusion: administrative barriers, security barriers, access to information, and discrimination or xenophobia.

Figure 2. School attendance before and after migrating/moving



School dropout is aggravated by immigration policies that prolong the stay in transit (up to 6 months or more, according to research testimonies), added to the lack of documents and institutional negligence. Federal programs such as Where I Go, School Goes With Me (SEP-UNICEF) are not effectively implemented in areas of high insecurity, such as shelters in Reynosa, where families are afraid to send their children to nearby schools because of the risk of kidnapping or recruitment. In addition, according to what a humanitarian worker reported in a focus group:

"There is no institution that is in charge or wants to go into monitoring the education of girls and boys, even when they are from Mexico. Partly due to security, since they are not followed up in the area where the shelters are"

(Humanitarian worker, who participated in a focus group in Reynosa).

Discrimination in schools deepens this problem because, according to testimonies collected, "the mothers, fathers and caregivers of the Mexican population do not want their children to live with children on the move," in addition to the fact that "teachers do not have this process of sensitisation, they do not know the rights of children on the move." Likewise, in Ciudad Juárez, Indigenous and Haitian CAY face rejection from teachers and classmates. Added to the above is the lack of curricular adaptation: only three of the shelters studied offer formal educational programs, and only Yes We Can in Tijuana has certification from the Ministry of Public Education (SEP). In addition, classes in hostels are usually recreational activities without academic validity, which increases the educational lag.

On the other hand, administrative barriers are critical. Although the law guarantees access to education regardless of immigration status, in practice, apostilled birth certificates or proof of residence are required; unaccompanied CAY faces these obstacles to a greater extent. In addition, the lack of interpreters for CAY who speak indigenous languages (such as Tsotsil or Nahuatl) or Haitian Creole limits their integration. For example, in Tijuana, a girl from Guerrero, although Mexican, was rejected from two schools for not speaking fluent Spanish.

Finally, it was identified that one of the main barriers to accessing education is misinformation since many families of CAY themselves are unaware that they have the right to education in Mexico. The problem is exacerbated in the case of unaccompanied CAY, as one humanitarian worker puts it:

"They believe and are afraid to approach to avoid being channelled to a shelter because they come alone, they travel alone, so the fear of being in a shelter, in an enclosed space is something that also greatly limits unaccompanied children to come closer".

(Humanitarian worker, after a personal interview).

4.5.2 Access to comprehensive health

All CAY access to comprehensive health is a fundamental right, regardless of nationality or immigration status. However, this right continues to be systematically violated in the three contexts analysed for CAY on the move. In particular, access to sexual and reproductive rights, information, and treatment free from discrimination are elements that stand out in the research - aggravated in the case of unaccompanied children, who face more significant difficulties in receiving medical attention, mainly owing to the legal requirement of caregiver consent, according to a social worker from Reynosa in a focus group.

In this sense, the absence of spaces for education in sexual and reproductive rights within the shelters was identified since these issues are usually vetoed by the administrations of the reception spaces and, in general, and beyond religious affiliations, complied with by the families so as not to put their stay at risk.

Accompanied by a lack of information about the right to health and language barriers. *"The population tends to think that because they are foreigners, they do not have this right"* (Humanitarian worker, from a personal interview). The lack of knowledge is especially critical among unaccompanied CAY, who avoid going to hospitals or clinics for fear of being channelled to shelters since *"they think that being there they will be channelled to a shelter because they come alone"* (Humanitarian worker, after personal interview). The combination of these barriers reflects a system reproducing exclusions in practice despite its inclusive legal framework.

Likewise, the testimonies reveal a recurrent pattern where *"the guard, as soon as he hears that they are a population on the move, dispatches them without even allowing them to ask for information"* (Humanitarian worker, in a personal interview), alleging lack of capacity or non-existent administrative requirements. The initial exclusion is aggravated when, upon gaining access, CAY face *"reluctance [in care] and scolding by doctors"* (Humanitarian worker, through a personal interview), including extreme cases such as that of an adolescent victim of sexual abuse who *"was scolded by the doctor because he told her that the product did not coincide with the weeks she said [...] these treatments that there is no awareness towards the population"* (Humanitarian worker, after a personal interview), evidencing discriminatory treatment even in situations of extreme vulnerability.



Unaccompanied children
on the move at a shelter in
Mexico © Plan International

"They think that being there they will be channelled to a shelter because they come alone"

(Humanitarian worker, after a personal interview).

4.5.3 Mental health and psycho-emotional support

Emotional well-being is often relegated to the background to more immediate physical needs, such as food, shelter, or basic medical care. Thus, many families in transit postpone psychological care, with the expectation that the emotional situation will improve once they reach their destination. A participant in a focus group held in Reynosa points out:

"It's not that parents do not want to care for their children, but they must focus on what's happening. They often say, 'When we get to the United States, when we are at our destination, things will get better, and then I will focus on you.'"
(Humanitarian worker, after a personal interview).

Children and youth fleeing internal violence present post-traumatic stress or distrust of the authorities, especially if they experience situations of collusion between organised crime groups and local security agents. One focus group participant noted:

"The kids come in with a defensive face, they are all bad, I don't know them, don't touch me... but over time, her face changes"
(Shelter Director, after participating in a focus group).

Likewise, the prolonged separation of parents has generated trauma of abandonment, especially in younger children and youth who cannot understand why their parents are not with them or why they have stayed for long periods in shelters with little or no contact. In the case of unaccompanied CAY with cultural or nationality differences, these effects are even more severe.

In this regard, a focus group participant explained:

"Many times, children cannot even communicate with their relatives. There are foreign children, even from countries like Afghanistan, who cannot make calls to their parents because of the time difference or lack of access to the media. Generating feelings of abandonment and causes deep trauma".
(Lawyer, who participated in a focus group).

According to information gathered in one of the consultative focus groups with authorities and conversations with key actors, incidents of suicide and escapes from DIF shelters are reported, which reflects the seriousness of the emotional problems faced by CAY in these spaces. That is, cases of stress, anxiety and depression in CAY are influenced by the availability of spaces and how organizations and government agencies offer care. A humanitarian worker expressed in a focus group: *"In these spaces, we have detected symptoms of stress, anxiety, depression in children, in girls... we often do so from an adult-centric perspective"* (Humanitarian worker, focus group participation), an approach that limits the capacity of institutions to understand and address the specific needs of children and adolescents.

In mobility contexts, CAY face serious challenges in mental health, which, in the current context, are aggravated by the suspension of psycho-emotional programs after cuts in international funding. In this regard, a teenager in Ciudad Juárez expressed with sadness the impact of these cuts and the closure of projects of organizations such as KIND and HIAS: *"Psychologists are very cool, but the psychologist told me that they will no longer be there"* (José, Mexico, in a personal interview).

4.5.4 Legal protection and representation

In the case of unaccompanied CAY, testimonies collected in interviews and focus groups reveal that the Comprehensive Protection of the Rights of Children and Youth in Migration Pathway is not always implemented effectively due to the lack of knowledge of the parties involved, the constant rotation of personnel in institutions, and the absence of inter-institutional communication, as shown below.

An illustrative case of the lack of adequate legal representation for CAY on the move is that of a girl from Belize whose Honduran mother was in the United States and who, after being detained in Monterrey, faced pressure to be sent to Honduras against her nationality and her right to family reunification. According to the defence lawyer,

"The mother was desperate, and we had to intervene to stop the process and guarantee her right to reunification with her mother in the United States"
(Lawyer, in a personal interview).

Exemplifying how the lack of knowledge on the part of the authorities and the absence of an efficient legal representation system risks the rights of CAY on the move.

Similarly, according to interviews with public servants and humanitarian workers, the fragmentation of responsibilities between different bodies, such as the National Institute of Migration (INM), the Office of the Procurator for the Protection of Children and youth and civil society organizations, has resulted in inconsistent processes that affect the guarantee of the rights of the population. According to the experience of an official of the State Population Council of Ciudad Juárez, *"there is no clear coordination between the institutions. Each works independently, which generates duplication of efforts or, worse, gaps in care."*

The lack of coordination is compounded by the constant staff turnover, especially in direct care areas. An aid worker said:

"Every time staff changes, we have to re-explain the protocols and the needs of the children. The delays processes and affects the continuity of care"
(Humanitarian worker, in a personal interview).



Unaccompanied girl on the move at a shelter in Mexico © Plan International

4.6 Violence

Children and adolescents on the move face multiple forms of violence in their places of origin, during transit and in reception spaces, affecting their well-being, development and access to rights. Coming mainly from contexts marked by structural violence—such as institutional and criminal impunity, such as threats from armed groups/delinquency, domestic violence, and organised crime—their displacement or migration is usually a survival strategy. However, travel and prolonged stay at the border do not guarantee safety; in many cases, they expose them to new risks, which impact their immediate safety, their psycho-emotional health, and their long-term well-being².

2. Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). (2022). Report on the Regional Situation 2020: Preventing and Responding to Violence against Children in the Region of the Americas. <https://doi.org/10.37774/9789275322949>.

4.6.1 Family and gender-based violence

Domestic and gender-based violence is a key trigger. Testimonies in Reynosa and Tijuana reveal cases of physical abuse, death threats and sexual abuse that force mothers, sons and daughters to flee. Children and youth develop self-protection strategies, such as avoiding unsafe spaces or asking adults for help. Still, the lack of reliable support networks during transit exposes them to more significant dangers.

Marco, a teenager from Haiti, in an interview, narrates how his father *"scolded them, beat us and put us to work"* and that he was *"too bad, my mother beat her, mistreated her, threatened her. One day he told her that, if she left or went somewhere else, he was going to look for her and order her to be killed,"* multiple testimonies of single women travelling with CAY to flee violent partners or abusive family members were also documented in the investigation process.

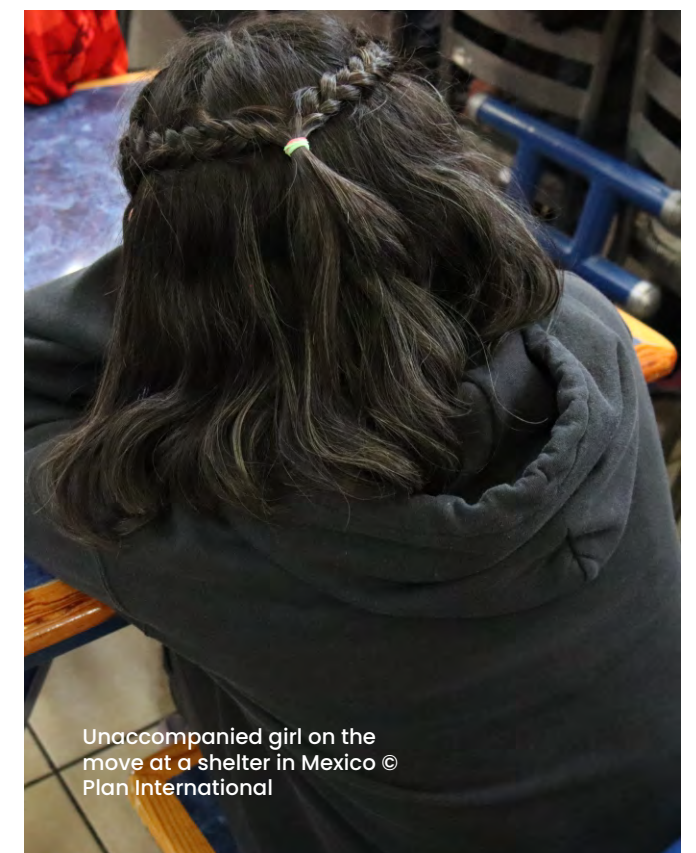
In several cases documented from interviews and surveys, domestic violence was not only the trigger for their mobility situation but also conditioned how CAY faced displacement, often in situations of greater vulnerability. In the focus group held with girls from seven to ten years old in Tijuana, testimonies emerged where they acknowledged having been victims of abuse and harassment, which has led them to develop strategies to protect themselves against these situations:

"If they stare at me, I can say I want to go drink water, or we can say I am going to the bathroom or drink water and I'll be back and never come back"
(Estrella, 8 years old, State of Mexico, who participated in a focus group).

4.6.2 Organised crime violence

In countries such as Honduras, El Salvador, and Mexico, organised crime forcibly recruits children and youth, especially youth, through coercion or false promises. In the words of José, a child/adolescent in a personal interview, organised crime has *"many ways to find and grab you, and there is also a part with many rocks, and it is difficult to run."* Unaccompanied CAY are the most vulnerable, with documented cases of disappearance and exploitation.

Likewise, during transit, the risk of kidnapping, extortion or human trafficking intensifies, particularly on irregular routes. In Ciudad Juárez and Reynosa, the presence of organised crime groups limits safe mobility contexts. At the same time, the increasing militarisation of the border and the tightening of Mexican immigration controls have forced many families and unaccompanied CAY to opt for irregular and dangerous routes, exposing them to trafficking networks, express trafficking and kidnappings.



Unaccompanied girl on the move at a shelter in Mexico © Plan International

4.6.3 Institutional violence

Migration policies and bureaucracy can generate revictimization. As documented in Tijuana, protracted family reunification processes—which can take years—leave CAY in limbo, while in some cases, shelters complicate processes of communication with their families and access to advocates. Added to this is the secrecy and the absence of independent monitoring, which limits the possibility that other organizations or actors can intervene, observe or accompany the processes. The lack of transparency and accountability allows possible violations of CAY rights to go unnoticed and unpunished. In this regard, a testimony mentions:

"We are concerned that the children sent to the DIF are isolated. They have no information about their rights, they are incommunicado, and in many cases, they cannot even communicate with their families".

(Social worker from Tijuana, in a personal interview).

4.6.4 Violence in foster care

Shelters can also be spaces in which violence is reproduced. In Reynosa, its location in areas controlled by organised crime prevents CAY from accessing education or health. A participant in a focus group with key stakeholders in Reynosa highlights that:

"Parents do not want to take the children out for fear that they will be kidnapped or recruited by organised crime"

(Humanitarian worker, during a focus group participation).

Within these spaces, overcrowding, distrust of other residents, and lack of supervision facilitate abuses. In addition, the cultural differences between Mexican and foreign CAYs generate tensions, harassment and exclusion.

5. Recommendations

The recommendations presented below arise from a research process conducted between November 2024 and February 2025, a period marked by deep political and social uncertainty, particularly related to the change of administration in the United States. During this time, the voices of both accompanied and unaccompanied CAY, service providers, and caregivers interviewed reflected a tense and ambiguous sense of waiting in the face of the possibility of transformations in migration policies. The atmosphere permeated the stories, emotions and decisions of those who, in their transit through Mexico, are trapped or fleeing scenarios of violence, lack of options and despair.

In this context, this report's findings and recommendations remain relevant and take on greater urgency. The conditions of transit and stay of unaccompanied children have not improved substantially. On the contrary, many face the impossibility of continuing their way or returning without access to adequate services that allow them to imagine and build alternatives for a dignified life. Therefore, improving the quality, coverage and relevance of services aimed at this population cannot wait; it is a humanitarian imperative and a shared responsibility.

The recommendations summarise the main findings; a broader and more detailed set can be consulted in the full research document.



From Guatemala, *Heidi shares with us a drawing of her migration journey within a Save the Children Child-Friendly Space in Tijuana, Baja California. © Miguel Vera, Save the Children and El Diálogo

5.1 Effective and inclusive access to education

Due to administrative, linguistic, and cultural barriers, their mobility situation interrupts CAY's education. Local authorities lack adapted and agile strategies.

It is recommended to:

- Design flexible strategies that guarantee access and educational continuity.
- Strengthen inter-institutional and intersectoral coordination.
- Ensure that gender, interculturality, human rights and childhood approaches are included in educational programmes, including sensitisation to parents/caregivers about the rights and access to education of migrant CAY.
- Train public personnel, teachers and educational personnel in enrolment and academic continuity.
- Promote safe school spaces with psychoeducational support.

5.2. Psychosocial care and comprehensive protection

Traumatic experiences severely affect the mental health of CAY on the move, especially at borders, where there is a critical gap in service provision. I

It is recommended to:

- Expand psychosocial services with an intercultural, gender and human rights approach.
Train staff in sensitive and specialised care.
- Implement differentiated protocols for victims of violence, avoiding revictimization.
- Increase efforts to guarantee family unity in reunification processes.

5.3 Institutional strengthening and multisectoral cooperation

Coordination deficiencies generate fragmented responses.

It is recommended to:

- Consolidate cooperation mechanisms between levels of government and specialised actors.
- Extend coordination efforts and provision of protection services beyond formal reception spaces to reach a greater number of CAYs on the move
- Transparent spaces for dialogue and participatory monitoring
- Guarantee cultural mediation and language services.
- Strengthen the articulation between SIPINNA and the Protection Attorneys' Offices.

5.4. Continuous training and strengthening of staff

Few trained personnel, high turnover and work burnout were detected.

It is recommended to:

- Increase trained personnel with decent working conditions and constant training.
- Train and sensitise service providers in comprehensive care.
- Implement incentives, self-care and psychological support for staff.

5.5 Financing and institutional sustainability

The reduction in funding compromises the continuity of services.

It is recommended to:

- Diversify sources of financing (public, private, and international).
- Ensure transparency and monitoring of resource use.
- Ensure the sustainability of key programmes for CAY on the move.

5.6. Community inclusion and mobility safety

Discriminatory attitudes and a lack of safe transportation options were identified.

It is recommended to:

- Promote awareness campaigns in host communities.
- Ensure safe and accessible transportation for migrant and forcibly displaced CAY.
- Train community actors and operators in CAY's rights.



Mother and daughter from Haiti, at the Child-Friendly Space in Tijuana, Baja California.
©Miguel Vera, Save the Children and El Diálogo

5.7 Attention to forced displacement and interculturality

Forced displacement is still not adequately visible.

It is recommended to:

- Establish specific registration and monitoring mechanisms.
- Develop public policies that recognise and protect indigenous peoples' linguistic, cultural, and educational rights.
- Strengthen border protection systems with adequate resources and specialised personnel.
- Ensure tailored access to education, especially in border contexts.










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Published in 2025

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